SHIP OF FOOLS

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Once upon a time, the captain and the mates of a ship grew so vain of their seamanship, so full of hubris and so impressed with themselves, that they went mad. They turned the ship north and sailed until they met with icebergs and dangerous floes, and they kept sailing north into more and more perilous waters, solely in order to give themselves opportunities to perform ever-more-brilliant feats of seamanship.

As the ship reached higher and higher latitudes, the passengers and crew became increasingly uncomfortable. They began quarreling among themselves and complaining of the conditions under which they lived.

“Shiver me timbers,” said an able seaman, “if this ain’t the worst voyage I’ve ever been on. The deck is slick with ice; when I’m on lookout the wind cuts through me jacket like a knife; every time I reef the foresail I blamed-near freeze me fingers; and all I get for it is a miserable five shillings a month!”

“You think *you* have it bad!” said a lady passenger. “I can’t sleep at night for the cold. Ladies on this ship don’t get as many blankets as the men. It isn’t fair!”

A Mexican sailor chimed in: “¡Chingado! I’m only getting half the wages of the Anglo seamen. We need plenty of food to keep us warm in this climate, and I’m not getting my share; the Anglos get more. And the worst of it is that the mates always give me orders in English instead of Spanish.”

“I have more reason to complain than anybody,” said an American Indian sailor. “If the palefaces hadn’t robbed me of my ancestral lands, I wouldn’t even be on this ship, here among the icebergs and arctic winds. I would just be paddling a canoe on a nice, placid lake. I deserve compensation. At the very least, the captain should let me run a crap game so that I can make some money.”

The bosun spoke up: “Yesterday the first mate called me a ‘fruit’ just because I suck cocks. I have a right to suck cocks without being called names for it!”

It’s not only humans who are mistreated on this ship,” interjected an animal-lover among the passengers, her voice quivering with indignation. “Why, last week I saw the second mate kick the ship’s dog twice!”

One of the passengers was a college professor. Wringing his hands he exclaimed,

“All this is just awful! It’s immoral! It’s racism, sexism, speciesism, homophobia, and exploitation of the working class! It’s discrimination! We must have social justice: Equal wages for the Mexican sailor, higher wages for all sailors, compensation for the Indian, equal blankets for the ladies, a guaranteed right to suck cocks, and no more kicking the dog!”

“Yes, yes!” shouted the passengers. “Aye-aye!” shouted the crew. “It’s discrimination! We have to demand our rights!”

The cabin boy cleared his throat.

“Ahem. You all have good reasons to complain. But it seems to me that what we really have to do is get this ship turned around and headed back south, because if we keep going north we’re sure to be wrecked sooner or later, and then your wages, your blankets, and your right to suck cocks won’t do you any good, because we’ll all drown.”

But no one paid any attention to him, because he was only the cabin boy.

The captain and the mates, from their station on the poop deck, had been watching and listening. Now they smiled and winked at one another, and at a gesture from the captain the third mate came down from the poop deck, sauntered over to where the passengers and crew were gathered, and shouldered his way in amongst them. He put a very serious expression on his face and spoke thusly:

“We officers have to admit that some really inexcusable things have been happening on this ship. We

hadn't realized how bad the situation was until we heard your complaints. We are men of good will and want to do right by you. But – well – the captain is rather conservative and set in his ways, and may have to be prodded a bit before he'll make any substantial changes. My personal opinion is that if you protest vigorously – but always peacefully and without violating any of the ship's rules – you would shake the captain out of his inertia and force him to address the problems of which you so justly complain."

Having said this, the third mate headed back toward the poop deck. As he went, the passengers and crew called after him, "Moderate! Reformer! Goody-liberal! Captain's stooge!" But they nevertheless did as he said. They gathered in a body before the poop deck, shouted insults at the officers, and demanded their rights: "I want higher wages and better working conditions," cried the able seaman. "Equal blankets for women," cried the lady passenger. "I want to receive my orders in Spanish," cried the Mexican sailor. "I want the right to run a crap game," cried the Indian sailor. "I don't want to be called a fruit," cried the bosun. "No more kicking the dog," cried the animal lover. "Revolution now," cried the professor.

The captain and the mates huddled together and conferred for several minutes, winking, nodding and smiling at one another all the while. Then the captain stepped to the front of the poop deck and, with a great show of benevolence, announced that the able seaman's wages would be raised to six shillings a month; the Mexican sailor's wages would be raised to two-thirds the wages of an Anglo seaman, and the order to reef the foresail would be given in Spanish; lady passengers would receive one more blanket; the Indian sailor would be allowed to run a crap game on Saturday nights; the bosun wouldn't be called a fruit as long as he kept his cocksucking strictly private; and the dog wouldn't be kicked unless he did something really naughty, such as stealing food from the galley.

The passengers and crew celebrated these concessions as a great victory, but the next morning, they were again feeling dissatisfied.

"Six shillings a month is a pittance, and I still freeze me fingers when I reef the foresail," grumbled the able seaman. "I'm still not getting the same wages as the Anglos, or enough food for this climate," said the Mexican sailor. "We women still don't have enough blankets to keep us warm," said the lady passenger. The other crewmen and passengers voiced similar complaints, and the professor egged them on.

When they were done, the cabin boy spoke up – louder this time so that the others could not easily ignore him:

"It's really terrible that the dog gets kicked for stealing a bit of bread from the galley, and that women don't have equal blankets, and that the able seaman gets his fingers frozen; and I don't see why the bosun shouldn't suck cocks if he wants to. But look how thick the icebergs are now, and how the wind blows harder and harder! We've got to turn this ship back toward the south, because if we keep going north we'll be wrecked and drowned."

"Oh yes," said the bosun, "It's just so *awful* that we keep heading north. But why should I have to keep cocksucking in the closet? Why should I be called a fruit? Ain't I as good as everyone else?"

"Sailing north is *terrible*," said the lady passenger. "But don't you see? That's exactly why women need more blankets to keep them warm. I demand equal blankets for women now!"

"It's quite true," said the professor, "that sailing to the north imposes great hardships on all of us. But changing course toward the south would be unrealistic. You can't turn back the clock. We must find a mature way of dealing with the situation."

"Look," said the cabin boy, "If we let those four madmen up on the poop deck have their way, we'll all be drowned. If we ever get the ship out of danger, then we can worry about working conditions, blankets for women, and the right to suck cocks. But first we've got to get this vessel turned around. If a few of us get together, make a plan, and show some courage, we can save ourselves. It wouldn't take many of us – six or eight would do. We could charge the poop, chuck those lunatics overboard, and turn the ship to the south."

The professor elevated his nose and said sternly, "I don't believe in violence. It's immoral."

"It's unethical *ever* to use violence," said the bosun.

"I'm terrified of violence," said the lady passenger.

The captain and the mates had been watching and listening all the while. At a signal from the captain, the third mate stepped down to the main deck. He went about among the passengers and crew, telling them that there were still many problems on the ship.

“We have made much progress,” he said, “But much remains to be done. Working conditions for the able seaman are still hard, the Mexican still isn’t getting the same wages as the Anglos, the women still don’t have quite as many blankets as the men, the Indian’s Saturday-night crap game is a paltry compensation for his lost lands, it’s unfair to the bosun that he has to keep his cocksucking in the closet, and the dog still gets kicked at times.

“I think the captain needs to be prodded again. It would help if you all would put on another protest – as long as it remains nonviolent.”

As the third mate walked back toward the stern, the passengers and the crew shouted insults after him, but they nevertheless did what he said and gathered in front of the poop deck for another protest. They ranted and raved and brandished their fists, and they even threw a rotten egg at the captain (which he skillfully dodged).

After hearing their complaints, the captain and the mates huddled for a conference, during which they winked and grinned broadly at one another. Then the captain stepped to the front of the poop deck and announced that the able seaman would be given gloves to keep his fingers warm, the Mexican sailor would receive wages equal to three-fourths the wages of an Anglo seaman, the women would receive yet another blanket, the Indian sailor could run a crap game on Saturday *and* Sunday nights, the bosun would be allowed to suck cocks publicly after dark, and no one could kick the dog without special permission from the captain.

The passengers and crew were ecstatic over this great revolutionary victory, but by the next morning they were again feeling dissatisfied and began grumbling about the same old hardships.

The cabin boy this time was getting angry.

“You damn fools!” he shouted. “Don’t you see what the captain and the mates are doing? They’re keeping you occupied with your trivial grievances about blankets and wages and the dog being kicked so that you won’t think about what is *really* wrong with this ship -–– that it’s getting farther and farther to the north and we’re all going to be drowned. If just a few of you would come to your senses, get together, and charge the poop deck, we could turn this ship around and save ourselves. But all you do is whine about petty little issues like working conditions and crap games and the right to suck cocks.”

The passengers and the crew were incensed.

“Petty!!” cried the Mexican, “Do you think it’s reasonable that I get only three-fourths the wages of an Anglo sailor? Is that *petty*?

“How can you call *my* grievance trivial? shouted the bosun. “Don’t you know how humiliating it is to be called a fruit?”

“Kicking the dog is not a ‘petty little issue!’” screamed the animal-lover. “It’s heartless, cruel, and brutal!”

“Alright then,” answered the cabin boy. “These issues are not petty and trivial. Kicking the dog is cruel and brutal and it is humiliating to be called a fruit. But in comparison to our *real* problem – in comparison to the fact that the ship is still heading north – your grievances *are* petty and trivial, because if we don’t get this ship turned around soon, we’re all going to drown.“

“Fascist!” said the professor.

“Counterrevolutionary!” said the lady passenger. And all of the passengers and crew chimed in one after another, calling the cabin boy a fascist and a counterrevolutionary. They pushed him away and went back to grumbling about wages, and about blankets for women, and about the right to suck cocks, and about how the dog was treated. The ship kept sailing north, and after a while it was crushed between two icebergs and everyone drowned.